

THE POISON DIARY OF 1995 - Part 2

Dato' Dzulkifli Abd Razak

Article

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In the second half of 1995, poisoning tragedies continued unabated. The next part of the Poison Diary of 1995 notes a larger number of poison-related incidents involving the environment, especially at the international level.

July

In Terengganu, a food poisoning case involving 173 female hostel residents was reported after they had consumed hostel canteen food were. More than 50 of them were treated for food poisoning at the local hospital.

Meanwhile, a study revealed that Cameron Highland had one of the highest suicide rates in the world. The main factor was allegedly the availability of concentrated pesticides.

Enforcement on drink-driving began on July 1 in the Klang Valley. The law against drink-driving comes under the Road Transport Act 1987 passed by the parliament in 1993. In their first week of its enforcement, the police booked more than 50 motorists for driving under the influence of alcohol. Offenders can be fined up to RM2,000 or face a maximum jail sentence of six months.

In Japan, a gas attack was attempted again. A mysterious gas was released in the Yokohama City Subway Station, creating another poison scare for the Japanese. Twenty-five people were hospitalised, complaining of sore throats and pain in the eyes. The nature of the gas has not been made known to the public.

August

This month marked the 50th anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Millions across the globe mourned the tragic events that destroyed human lives and the environment through the use of nuclear power. The first atomic bomb, dropped on Aug 6, 1945, at 8.15am, spurred a nuclear race among nations.

In Guyana, a huge cyanide spill which fouled the country's longest river was suspected to be due to seepage from the effluent of a gold mine near the town of Bartica. Cyanide solution was used to treat ore and help extract gold deposits by American and Canadian companies.

More than 1462.5 million litres of the deadly effluent were believed to have been poured into the river and traveled 80km downstream. Residents reported hundreds of dead fish and other marine life forms in the Essequibo River. The area was declared an environmental disaster, Guyana's worst.

Seventy-five toxic waste containers, which had been sitting at the Jakarta port for two-and-a-half years, were reshipped to the Netherlands. Protests by environmentalists in Indonesia prompted the two governments to reach an agreement on the return of the waste. Earlier in May, Indonesia had decided to allow certain importers to resume waste imports after banning it in 1992.

In Hong Kong, some 250 doctors and nurses suffered food poisoning after eating seafood during a dinner party at the hospital canteen. Twelve of them were admitted to the wards they serviced.

Back home, a similar occurrence affected 103 pupils. They were rushed for treatment to a hospital in Kelantan after eating noodles at the school canteen.

September

The Ministry of Health drafted a new regulation to ensure a high standard of cleanliness in the food industry so that the number of poisoning cases could be checked. The number of cases increased from 1,599 in 1993 to 2,283 in 1994. Factors contributing to food poisoning were found to be related to unhygienic practices of food handlers.

Tens of thousands of steroid-based pills worth about RM360,000 were confiscated from several places in Prai. This was dubbed the largest seizure of illegally made steroid-based products in the state of Penang. The product was allegedly used in traditional medicines purported for the treatment of paralysis, backache and rheumatism.

On the international front, the world's largest inland sea, the Caspian Sea, was threatened by toxic wastes. The single largest source entering the sea is the Volga River, carrying more than a fifth of all the waste water disgorged by Russia, according to one report.

From the petrochemical industry alone, some 67,000 tonnes of wastes are flushed into the sea every year. The former Soviet Union too has accumulated masses of radioactive wastes dumped near the sea's edge. In addition to potential health threats, the fishing industry was also affected.

In Britain, Temazepam, its most widely prescribed drug, was put under tight control. It was widely misused, resulting in 77 drug-related deaths in the Scottish region of Strathclyde alone. The drug is melted down with heroin and injected as a cocktail by addicts. The injected mixture can coagulate in the blood, leading to gangrene and even death.

In spite of worldwide appeal and protest, France went ahead to resume the first of a series of eight nuclear tests in Mururoa Atoll in the South Pacific. The blast, which equalled about 20,000 tonnes of TNT, was more than that of the atomic bomb that destroyed Hiroshima.

Since 1992, China and France have been the only two countries to conduct nuclear tests. France conducted 175 underground blasts over 18 years at Mururoa. Since 1960, France alone has set off 205 nuclear blasts in the South Pacific and Algeria.

October

The Pharmacy Enforcement Division of the Health Ministry identified eight traditional medicines containing scheduled poisons - cortisone, dexamethasone, indomethacin and progesterone. Except for indomethacin, the rest are steroids believed to have been added into the herbal preparations, causing unwarranted risks to consumers.

The manufacturers and distributors of these products could not be traced as they had used fictitious company names and addresses on the product labels. The sale of medicines containing scheduled poisons without licence is an offence under The Poison Act 1952 (Revised 1989).

The Vector Control Research Unit in University Sains Malaysia estimated that Malaysians spend RM100,000 annually on mosquito coils to keep insects away. The repellent contains the pesticide pyrethroid.

In Auckland, New Zealand, fire and explosion were reported to have erupted in an agricultural chemical factory. The chemical involved in the blaze was identified as azinphos methyl, a very toxic organophosphate. Thirty-five people were hospitalised due to toxic gas inhalation.

In a similar incident in the town of Kosice, Slovakia, more than 2,000 Slovaks were evacuated when a blast at a steel mill ruptured a pipeline carrying carbon monoxide gas. Thirteen people were killed in the incident.

In Taipei, Taiwan, more than 1,000 elementary school pupils and teachers suffered food poisoning after eating food supplied by a meal company.

Meanwhile, France exploded two more nuclear bombs in the Pacific Islands region, in continued defiance of international opinion. The International Court of Justice (World Court) at the Hague opened its session to rule on the legality of the use of nuclear weapons, taking into consideration the effects of nuclear weapons on health and the environment.

Even as the year drew to a close, the poisons kept lingering in the last two months of 1995, as reviewed in the final part of the diary.

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